

Zygmunt Bauman

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Zygmunt Bauman (born 19 November 1925 in Poznań) is a Polish-born sociologist who, since 1971, has resided in England after being driven there by an anti-Semitic purge. Professor of sociology at the University of Leeds (and since 1990 emeritus professor), Bauman has become best known for his analyses of the links between modernity and the Holocaust and of postmodern consumerism.

Biography

Zygmunt Bauman was born to non-practicing Polish-Jewish parents in Poznań, Poland, in 1925. The family escaped into the Soviet zone of occupation, after Poland was invaded by Nazi-German troops in 1939 at the beginning of World War II. He later served in the Soviet-controlled Polish First Army, with which he participated in the battles of Kolberg (now Kołobrzeg) and Berlin and in which he also worked as a political education instructor.

In the KBW, Bauman had risen to the rank of major when he was suddenly dishonourably discharged in 1953, after his father had inquired about the possibility of emigration to Israel with the Israeli embassy in Warsaw. This led to a severe temporary estrangement between the father and son, as Bauman not only did not share his father's Zionist tendencies, but was strongly anti-Zionist himself. During the period of unemployment that followed, Bauman completed his M.A. degree. He became a lecturer at the University of Warsaw in 1954, where he remained employed until 1968.

During a stay at the London School of Economics, where his supervisor was Robert McKenzie, he prepared a comprehensive study on the British socialist movement, which became his first major book. Published in Polish in 1959, a translated and revised edition appeared in English in 1972.

Bauman went on to publish several books, including *Socjologia na co dzień* ("Sociology for everyday life", 1964), which reached a large popular audience in Poland and later formed the foundation for the English-language text-book *Thinking Sociologically* (1990).

Initially, Bauman remained close to the official Marxist doctrine. However, he grew increasingly critical of the communist government under the influence of Antonio Gramsci's and Georg Simmel's work. Due to his critical position towards the regime, he was never nominally awarded the title of professor, even though he had completed his habilitation. However, Bauman de facto held the chair of his erstwhile teacher Julian Hochfeld, after Hochfeld had become vice-director of UNESCO's Department for Social Sciences in Paris in 1962.

Faced with increasing political pressure and the anti-Semitic campaign led by the populist minister Mieczysław Moczar, Bauman renounced his membership in the governing Polish United Workers' Party in January 1968. With the March 1968 events, the anti-Semitic campaign culminated in a purge, which drove most remaining Polish Jews out of the country, including many intellectuals who had fallen from grace with the communist government. Bauman, who had lost his chair at the University of Warsaw, was among them. Having had to give up Polish citizenship to be allowed to leave the country, he first went to Israel to teach at Tel Aviv University, before accepting a chair in sociology at the University of Leeds, where he intermittently also served as head of department. Since then, he has published almost exclusively in English, his third language, and his reputation has grown exponentially. Indeed, from the late 1990s, Bauman exerted a considerable influence on the

anti- or alter-globalization movement.

Bauman is married to writer Janina Bauman and has three daughters, among whom is the painter Lydia Bauman.

Work

Before finding his niche as a 'postmodern' thinker Bauman's early affiliation with Marxism led to a focus upon social stratification and the labour movement. After this, as he put it (in British newspaper 'The Guardian', 5th April 2003), 'honorable discharge' from this orthodox version of Marxism, Bauman's discovery of Antonio Gramsci prepared the way for him to work towards more theoretical, historically considered, and ultimately more global concerns. And it is primarily these later analyses, particularly his considerable body of work published after his retirement from teaching at Leeds in 1990, that have accorded him his present-day international reputation.

As early as the mid 1970s, with his call (in *Towards a Critical Sociology*, 1976) for sociology to become more self-reflexive rather than descriptive, Bauman's interest in deposing and questioning the inherent morality of a certain form of rationalism has been in evidence. For him, modernity — which he marks out by the opposition of order on the one hand and chaos on the other (cf. *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 1991) — possesses an inherent element that serves to circumscribe social life's ultimately aporetic (that is, indeterminate) qualities. This contention led him (in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 1989) to make the argument that the Holocaust, contrary to being history's best example of barbaric regression into pre-societal animality, was in fact confluent with modern principles and deployed many tenets of modern rationalism which, in other spheres, Western society is unequivocally proud of. Bauman, for instance, made the argument that both the bureaucratic division of labour (and therefore the division of moral obligation) and the Hobbesian view that humans are by nature amoral and by society moral in part underpinned the ideology that made the Holocaust possible. He thus utilized the ideas of Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno to argue that the Holocaust's evil was in fact a 'rationality of evil'.

The logic at work in *Modernity and the Holocaust* is underpinned by positions that can be seen in his work elsewhere. One of the most significant of these is the idea that — following Emmanuel Levinas and against, in his view, Freud, Durkheim and to an extent Weber — the first and foremost form of human experience is of social interdependence; and therefore that the first human relationship is a moral relationship. This belief informs his analysis of globalization which, in a manner similar to Jean Baudrillard, takes the position that the technological abstraction that precedes one's relationship to the 'global' world causes as many divides as it does bridges. Bauman therefore has continually demonstrated skepticism with regard to large-scale broad-brush social engineering — and as such he continually attracts accusations of pessimism — seeing these moves as the quickest route to a utilitarian view of humanity.

Another of these positions, which is only present in nascent form in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, is his theory of the 'stranger' (cf. *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 1991; and *Postmodern Ethics*, 1993). This hypothetical figure is, in Bauman's work, not one marked by particular existential propositions (such as the 'stranger' of Albert Camus) but is rather product of his position regarding modern society. Bauman's stranger is a figure created by society insofar as it attempts to cognitively order physical and social space, thus creating a form of human waste. Rather than being a friend or an enemy, Bauman's stranger is the individual who fits neither of these categories, remaining suspiciously undecidable (the reference to Derridean undecidability is intended here). The stranger thusly produces fear in his or her very being: his or her not being part of the (modern) order of society as one who fits within a preordained position creates fear as society continually fails to pin down this conspicuously unknown element.

Bauman's Postmodernity

Since the turn of the millennium Bauman has disposed with any form of explicit reference to 'postmodern' society (preferring the phrase 'liquid modern' society), but this is less to do with a rejection of his earlier ideas, where he avowedly characterized the present as 'postmodern', and more to do with a recognition of the term's being 'wrung dry' by misuse and overuse.

For Bauman the postmodernity has never been seen as in any way teleological, or relativistically, but rather he characterized it as the posthumous form of modernity. That is, for Bauman's modernity, society was seen as a process of ordering and progress to a rationalized society. This however disavowed the fractal and aporetic nature of human life, and thus its teleological illusions came to be, with the collapse of colonial enterprise, deposed. Bauman's idea of the postmodern therefore takes two forms. Firstly, as the drive to an ordered goal that is no longer recognizable, set amidst the collapsing of the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders'/'strangers' (a milieu in which the processes of cognitive ordering of the strange and different and the aesthetic appreciation of the strange and different are in continual conflict). Secondly, as a way of life in which such inherent human differentiation is accepted and reckoned with. His conception of social life is therefore not one of opposing the modern to the postmodern, but of interpolating two different logics within social life. (Hence, his present characterization of these two logics as being the dualistic 'solid' and 'liquid' modernity.)

References

↑ Piotr Gontarczyk, "Towarzysz 'Semjon': Profesor Zygmunt Bauman, intelektualny patron nowej lewicy, był oficerem i agentem komunistycznej bezpieki" [Comrade "Semjon": Professor Zygmunt Bauman, the intellectual patron of the New Left, was an officer and agent of the communist security apparatus], in: Ozon, no. 23/2006

Major Awards

Bauman was awarded the European Amalfi Prize for Sociology and Social Sciences in 1992 and the Theodor W. Adorno Award of the city of Frankfurt in 1998.

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